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# NST

## Nature, Society, and Thought

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### a Journal of Dialectical and Historical Materialism

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**The Global Economy and  
the National State**

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*(See page 278)*

# NST

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## **Nature, Society, and Thought**

# NST

# a Journal of Dialectical and Historical Materialism

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## Book Review

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*Disciplined Minds: A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul-Battering System That Shapes Their Lives.* By Jeff Schmidt. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000. 294 pages, cloth \$26.95.

### ***How the ruling class exercises ideological control***

Marx and Engels observed long ago in *The German Ideology* that the ruling ideas of any epoch are those of the ruling class. This ideological control, exercised for centuries over the working class through control of the media, government, and other institutions, has never been absolute. It can be argued, however, that today its effectiveness is greater than ever, in large part because the monopolization of the media is much greater than ever. To counter this, there has always been (as Marx showed) and still is a struggle by the working class in behalf of its own interests. A major problem today, however, is the lack of unity in this struggle, a lack fostered and nurtured very effectively by the ruling class.

A major ruling-class weapon in keeping up this division is the separation between workers of the mind and workers of the hand. Although this distinction is never hard and fast (no work is purely of the mind or purely by the hand), one way to characterize it is by the distinction between “professional” and “nonprofessional” workers. The ruling class relies on its professional workers for creative ideological work; this group educates and works to shape the opinions of a much larger sector of the working class.

This group of “professionals” is not at all negligible in size. In the United States, for example, it numbers some twenty-one million and is the fastest growing sector of the working class.<sup>1</sup> One of the various ways to define what is meant by the term “professional” is by level of educational attainment, so that one can include doctors, educators, engineers, scientists, lawyers, writers—in short, anyone with a professional degree. The data on levels of educational attainment in the United States parallel the occupational data.<sup>2</sup>

It is inevitable in this age of ever-increasing monopolization that many professionals themselves become proletarianized. Of every nine professionals today, only one is a free practitioner; the rest are salaried employees (Schmidt 2000, 18). So the ideological control of the ruling class over the ranks of the professionals, while always of great importance to the ruling class, is of even more importance today.

A new book by Jeff Schmidt, *Disciplined Minds*, attempts a detailed look at just how this is accomplished. The usual means of ruling-class influence on the opinions of professionals and nonprofessionals alike is through control of the government and media. Beyond this, the ruling class has ideological control over the workplace and the extensive training of professionals; this control is the primary focus of the book (although this emphasis is not explicitly stated). Schmidt describes the professional programs and graduate schools of the universities as a system of “turning politically independent thinkers into politically subordinate clones” (4).

If one considers the beginning of a student’s road to becoming a professional, the act of gaining admission to college or university, then it is clear that admission criteria are not neutral. Such criteria necessarily favor either the interests of the ruling class or those of the multiracial, male/female working class. Schmidt does discuss the question of whose interests are served by selection criteria (105–12). Here, he discusses affirmative-action programs in a positive manner, arguing that they are necessary to overcome bias against working-class, female, and minority applicants.

He is on less sound ground when he tackles the question of standardized tests, such as the ACT and SAT, used in the selection process. His position is that use of these tests should be abolished *because* they are a useful predictor of success in college. Colleges themselves, he argues, are biased, favoring with success persons having “white, middle-class, male-gendered attitudes and values” (182). Many criticisms of the SAT and ACT tests can be mounted, but Schmidt’s criticism is hardly likely to advance the struggle for a more democratic selection process.

Further weeding-out and changing of ideological thinking occur as students progress through graduate school. This is done, according to Schmidt, primarily at the level of qualifying examinations. He uses as an example the qualifying exam in physics (Schmidt is himself a product of that process, having obtained a Ph.D. in physics from the University of California). Physics is a good example because it is a field supposedly free of political bias.

In the typical physics qualifying examination, which he studies in considerable detail, there is an “emphasis on quick recall, memorized tricks, work on problem fragments, work under time pressure, endurance, quantitative results, comfort with confinement to details, and comfort with a particular social framework. The exam de-emphasizes physical insight, qualitative discussion, exploration, curiosity, creativity, history, philosophy, and so on. “This forces the student who wants to be passed to adopt an industrial view of the subject, to view it as an instrument of production, to use it in an alienated way” (136). This helps ensure that “students who are willing and able to conform to the faculty’s attitudes and values, which usually favor the status quo over social change, are less likely than others to get cooled out of professional training” (201).

Later, in the workplace (whether it be industry, government, or academe), the so-indoctrinated professional will continue his or her subordination by adopting “professional” behavior, namely, “the notion that experts should confine themselves to their ‘legitimate professional concerns’ and not ‘politicize’ their

work" (204).<sup>3</sup> In conflicts with employers, the professional is more apt to place the blame for these problems on management incompetence rather than on any fundamental conflict of interest. This attitude renders the professional employee weak as a force for his or her own defense, and impotent as a force for change in society (209).

Another aim of the book is to establish clearly the political nature of professional work. For instance, chapter 4 documents well how military and industrial concerns dominate "pure" or "basic" research in the United States—and by extension in the whole world.

Schmidt concludes with a section entitled "Resistance," in which he offers those beginning a professional career advice on how to avoid the brainwashing of the professional life. In a light-hearted style, Schmidt uses a U.S. Army manual advising captured American soldiers on how to avoid successful brainwashing by the "enemy," adapting it to give analogous advice to U.S. graduate students.

Overall, the book is a welcome addition to the libraries of Marxists and others seeking better understanding of the specifics of the ways the ruling class exercises ideological control. By knowing how the capitalist class divides nonprofessionals from professional members of the working class, one is better equipped to combat these divisions, and thus help to unite the whole working class.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out several flaws in the book, some of which show the need for a Marxist treatment of the subject.

1. Schmidt's approach is fundamentally anarchist, as illustrated when he remarks that "hierarchical organizations are fundamentally flawed" (271). He constantly emphasizes the *direction* and *disciplining* of scientists and professionals generally; this is the major focus of the book, as the title implies. He is concerned far less with the *content* of this direction, or whose interests it serves; his understanding lacks class analysis. With all the mistakes it made that paved the way for the downfall of socialism in the Soviet Union, that country was still a state

controlled by the working class. When Schmidt equates directed research in the Soviet Union with directed research in the United States (both, he feels, being equally reprehensible), he takes a classless approach (211).

2. Speaking as a physicist who has gone through training similar to Schmidt's, I must say that much of his criticism of this training is unconvincing. It does not seem to concern him that this same system of training (quite similar in the former Soviet Union and today's United States) has led in the past three-quarters of a century to space travel, and incredible advances in the theory of elementary particles, condensed-matter physics, astrophysics, etc. Nowhere in his book can one find any mention or appreciation of the accomplishments of modern physics (or, for that matter, of medicine, astronomy, engineering, biology. . . the list goes on and on). This is, of course, not to say that the system is perfect, nor that some of his points are not well taken. His analysis remains incomplete, however.

3. Although in one or two places Schmidt (rather casually) expresses support for unions, it is remarkable that in a book devoted to the ideology of professionals, not a word is said about the phenomenal trend toward unionization of the professional segment of the working class. Just a few indicators will show this. Since 1977, when the Department of Professional Employees was created in the AFL-CIO, union representation has fallen overall, but it has grown to 22 percent among the professional occupations (AFL-CIO Executive Council Report, 1999). The AMA's June 1999 decision to openly embrace collective bargaining and a union-style organization for doctors was of historic importance. Another historic event was the forty-day strike of 20,000 Boeing Corporation engineers, which ended in victory on 20 March 2000. Of course, the move toward unionization is in itself not an act of class consciousness, but it is a first step. In a typically leftist demonstration of desire to bypass steps on the road to revolution, Schmidt faults professionals for not seeing their conflicts with employers as part of a fundamental conflict between capital and labor (209).

*Disciplined Minds* is a freewheeling, thought-provoking examination of the way ideological control is exercised over an increasingly important section of the working class—the professionals. It is too bad that it falls short of fulfilling that task with complete adequacy.

John Pappademos

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## NOTES

1. According to the website of the Bureau of Labor Statistics (July 2000, <[www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpsatab4.htm](http://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpsatab4.htm)>), the broad category “managerial and professional specialties” increased from 22.6 percent of the work force in 1982 to 30.1 percent in 2000. All other occupational categories showed a decreasing percentage in that same period.

2. The percent of the population as a whole who have completed four years of college or more rose from 17.7 percent in 1982 to 24.3 percent in 1998, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census (<[www.census.gov/population/socdemo/education/tablea-01.txt](http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/education/tablea-01.txt)>).

3. It is interesting to recall an incident in my own experience which shows how this “professional” attitude can sometimes be used to protect an iconoclast in academe. As a physics professor, I once offered a seminar on the Marxist philosophy of physics. Conservatives in the physics department mounted an attack on my right to teach such a seminar, trying to enlist the support of the university’s philosophy department to criticize my credentials to teach such a seminar. The philosophers’ reply was they could not vouchsafe an opinion on the matter inasmuch as they had no one in the department who was an expert in Marxist philosophy!